



I am Human

You are not a robot.

Sarah sits on the pew in the hairdressers, scrolling through her phone, ticking boxes, killing time. She clicks male, aged fifty-five and living in London. Married, three children under the age of eighteen, a cat and a dog. They ask for her postcode, so she enters E1 7HX, which is what she always enters when she's claiming to live in London.

You have qualified for our survey, they say, and she clicks start.

The first page is about cat food.

'Easy.'

She knows how to navigate cat food. She could tell you everything you'd ever want to know about cat food.

From the list of popular brands she claims to be aware of *Whiskas*, *Purina One* and *Sheba*. She always does, because these are the products she has decided that Arthur, her middle aged, white, university educated accountant character from London has bought in the last twelve months. And if Arthur can be used to bluff her way through the next twenty questions – which she should have time for, while she waits for Grace, her hairdresser to finish with the customer in front of her – the survey website has promised a reward of 33p.

And of the products you have purchased in the last twelve months, which is your first choice?

'Whiskas', Arthur thinks, as Sarah clicks the appropriate box. It's obvious.

It's only Sarah, Grace and the customer in the chair that are in the shop, and seeing as it's after 7pm the sign on the door says closed and there won't be anyone else coming in.

'Make yourself a cup of tea, Sarah,' Grace said a minute or two before. 'Work away if you like.'

'I'm happy enough here,' Sarah said, holding up her phone.

And she is happy enough, in a way – in a minute by minute, don't ask me too many questions sort of way.

The survey habit started after she deleted Instagram and Facebook. It was quite simply too hard to see him there; too heart-breaking even to see his friends, or his sister posting adorable photographs of his Godson.

But even with social media deleted her hands would still instinctively reach for her phone two or three hundred times a day, and with the usual apps absent, her fingers needed something to do, didn't they? At first she scrolled Twitter, because he had no profile there, and that's where she saw and then kept seeing the add for *YouSayWePay*, a survey website promising 'instant cash rewards'. It kept appearing on her newsfeed, until finally, needing something, anything to stare at, she clicked on it, entered her e-mail address, created a password and opened a survey, just to see what it was about. At first the surveys took her nowhere. She'd click on them based on how long they would take – anything from one minute to half an hour – and what the reward was – somewhere between 1p and £3; but she never knew what the survey was about, and more often than not she was rejected from taking part in it.

Aged 25-32, Based in Northern Ireland, Living Alone and In Full Time Employment, with a passion for Reading, Jogging and not much else, tended to render her *Not the Profile We're Looking for*.

'You've been rejected, Sarah,' she said to herself. 'Where have you heard that before?'

Welcome to the Survey.

Grace has finished cutting the customers hair but has now started working on his beard.

'I'll be with you in ten,' she says. 'You know where the kettle is.'

So Grace takes out her phone and clicks on a survey which says it will take eight minutes. She completes the CAPTCHA question, correctly identifying all the squares that have a motorcycle in them, and her phone tells her *you are human*. The first few questions offer no insight into what the survey is about, so she decides that she is female, aged between 40 and 50, because being a middle-aged woman is often ideal, when it comes to surveys at least. A middle-aged woman can be full time-employed, with a large salary, or working part-time, or even retired. Can be single, living alone, or married with a family, responsible for children aged from infant to adult. She can be renting her home, have a mortgage, or own it outright, maybe even be a landlord, renting multiple properties.

Sarah's middle aged female character – Elaine, she calls her – has been all these things and more. Elaine has done her weekly shop at Lidl, but also at Marks and Spencer's; bought her clothes mainly online, or exclusively on the high street; worked in both IT and Entertainment. Elaine has done it all, and no matter what the subject, there are very few surveys she doesn't sail straight through.

How engaged are you with politics? 1 is not engaged at all. 10 is very engaged.

Elaine is very engaged in politics – any other answer would risk being kicked out of the survey straight away.

Did you vote in the last general election?

Tapping buttons, Elaine's persona floats through Sarah's mind like a memorised narrative.

'I did, and as a proud Edinburgh woman I voted for the Scottish Liberal Democrats.'

Did you vote in the 2016 referendum.

Sarah tuts. 'Of course I did, and I voted remain. For all the good that did.'

What ways do you follow politics?

'I read newspapers, both online and in print. I watch TV, I listen to podcasts. Two to three times a week. Talk to friends. I offer opinions.' Sarah clicks away on Elaine's behalf, flying through things on instinct. 'I don't trust what I read on social media. I somewhat trust print media. Less than I used to. I was born in 1980. My household Salary is over one hundred thousand pounds.'

After about five minutes she clicks on finish. The familiar graphic pops up, sparkling with stars. *Congratulations, you have received 55p.*

Are you happy to continue with the survey?

It started off harmlessly enough. Scrolling through the surveys half-heartedly as she watched TV at home; doing them in the staff room at work, her head stuck in her phone, but only in the same way everyone else's was stuck in theirs, even if she wasn't doing the same things. But



gradually she noticed just how much time she was spending on the app. It was never about the money – when she'd first reached the ten-pound withdrawal minimum she successfully withdrew it to her PayPal account, just to see if it was even possible, that it wasn't a scam. But since then, God knows how many surveys later, she hadn't touched her balance, and it was the shimmering glow of the £227.45 on the apps home screen that told her just how many hours she'd spent on it, answering questions that earned her pennies at a time. Lying about her preferences of airlines and budget hotels, making up weekly shopping hauls, and describing false experiences with various banks.

Her characters came on the journey with her. With Arthur and Elaine and Ryan and Claire and all their different backgrounds and experiences there weren't many surveys she couldn't qualify for. Claire, of course, was her favourite. Same age as Sarah, and living in Belfast too, but working in advertising. Claire was also single, but by choice – entirely by choice, because God knows she had her admirers'. Because she wanted to be, because she was strong and independent. She lived in a house – and get this: she owned it. With a mortgage, obviously, but still, she was a homeowner, not renting some apartment. It was quite a life Claire had, and Sarah liked answering these surveys on her behalf; liked the very act of it much more than the reward of receiving 19p for the honour.

The surveys never asked about physical appearance, but Sarah knew that Claire was around five foot five with blonde hair. Claire shopped both online and in store, from brands like Zara and Mango. She lived within a budget but wasn't afraid to pay extra for quality. And because Sarah knew that Claire preferred the shampoo brands Loreal and Olaplex, she knew that she looked after her hair and in fact had quality hair. Her hair was very different to Sarah's. Quite short, in a very stylish bob. It suited her. It was beautiful.

It's while thinking about Claire that she goes to the pictures in her phone and scrolls through her most recent screenshots.

'Are you ready?' Grace asks and Sarah looks up. She hadn't even realised that the other customer had left.

Please answer openly and honestly throughout.

'Are you sure about this?' Grace says.

Sarah is showing her a picture on her phone. The woman with short blonde hair, in a bob.

'It's very different is all, a big change.'

'I'm sure,' Sarah says.

Grace sighs. 'I haven't done anything like it in a while, is all.'

'I trust you.'

'OK then.'

Once you're in the chair you have to make conversation somehow, but even though Grace and Sarah are old friends, talking is hard. Talking to anyone has been hard lately.

So when Grace says this will take a while, so she'll have to cancel her planned trip to Tesco to do her weekly shop, Sarah asks:

'What supermarket do you usually go to for your weekly shop?'

'Tesco.'



'Are there any other supermarkets you would consider for your weekly shop?'

'Not really, why?'

'Do you just do one big shop a week, or do you do smaller top up shops as well?'

'I guess?'

'Where do you do your top up shops?'

'Just at the spar on the corner.'

'And how much do you usually spend?'

'Excuse me?'

Feeling Grace's reluctance, Sarah stops. *You haven't qualified for the survey.*

Just a few more questions about yourself.

'You can footer away on your phone or something, if you like', Grace says. 'So long as you keep your head still. This'll take a while.'

'I'm grand,' Grace says. The thought of Grace seeing her completing a survey over her shoulder was embarrassing enough, never mind her seeing the weird, involuntary answers she'd be giving, embodying Arthur, Elaine, Claire or Ryan.

Of course by now Sarah has grown to accept that Ryan, Male, aged 25-35, living in Northern Ireland was just him. He exercised, was a member of a gym. He cooked a meal from scratch 3-4 times a week, subscribed to Netflix and Amazon Plus but not Apple TV, and used Virgin Media as his main broadband provider but was open to the idea of changing in the next 1-2 years. He drove a car and was happy with his current insurance provider. He was single, living alone.

What was it she felt when Ryan's answers completed a survey, gained her a reward?

Not pride. Hopefully not that. Or appreciation, that wouldn't be good either. A closeness?

What did she feel when Ryan was rejected? Judged to be not what they were looking for?

Now you know how it feels.

'How do you think it's looking?' Grace asks, and Sarah realises she's been sat with her eyes closed. 'Are you liking it?'

There's a lot of hair by her feet; more certainly than there is in the mirror. She nods her head.

'Thank God for that.' Grace says. She's staring at Sarah in the mirror and Sarah wonders who it is she sees, Arthur or Ryan, or Elaine or Claire, or even Sarah herself, somewhere deep down in there.

'Look, I hope it does you good,' Grace says. 'Change can be good, you know? And I know you've had a lot of change lately.'

Sarah hesitates. 'I have,' she says.

'You never got that cup of tea. You'll stay for one when we're done here.'

Arthur drinks coffee, not tea. Elaine likes PG Tips.

'Oh I don't know.'

'It wasn't a question, Sarah.'

Grace keeps cutting.

'It's hard, I'm sure, is it?'

Ryan and Claire both drink Herbal tea, it's one of the things they have in common. Sarah loves that about him.

'It is. It's hard, you know?' Sarah says. 'A lot of emotions.'

'Of course there are emotions,' Grace says. 'You're human.'

Sarah looks at herself in the mirror.

'I am. I'm not a robot.'